

McCracken marks first year as voice of elderly

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FREDON — From his time serving as township committeeman and mayor to his new and distinguished position with the state, one Fredon resident has always answered his calling: to advocate for others.

In December, 43-year-old James McCracken celebrated his first anniversary as the New Jersey ombudsman for the institutionalized elderly. McCracken oversees a staff of about 30 people who advocate for elderly people living in nursing homes, assisted living facilities, developmental centers and psychiatric hospitals. The Office of the Ombudsman for the Institutionalized Elderly (OOIE) also investigates incidents of elder abuse or exploitation within those facilities.

"This is a very vulnerable population," McCracken said. "Many of them don't have a voice and are very vulnerable to abuse and exploitation from a variety of sources. They call this agency to get some help."

Laurie Brewer, OOIE chief of staff, said the agency receives more than 6,000 complaints each year.

"For me, personally, (this position) is a perfect fit," McCracken said. "The reason that I went into long-term care administration as opposed to some of other health care administration is (because) I really felt a calling to advocate for those types of people, who lived in those (long-term care) communities."

"This was an opportunity to take my core mission and do it on a statewide level," he said. McCracken said he was very pleased and proud of the strides he has made within his first year as the ombudsman, such as overseeing an increase in volunteer advocates assigned to nursing facilities; streamlining the operation of the office to reduce duplication of services with other state agencies; bolstering the OOIE's role in supporting Regional Ethics Committees; and expanding the office's efforts to investigate allegations of financial exploitation of elderly residents living in nursing facilities.

"Jim has a total of 20 years in health care, 16 of them in or around long-term care," Brewer said. "He brings a depth of knowledge about the challenges facing elderly individuals living in long-term care settings. Jim has said that what attracted him most to the ombudsman function was that it was so consistent with his personal mission: to ensure the best quality of life possible for elderly people living in a long-term care setting."

McCracken served on the Township Committee from 2003 to 2010. In his final year, when he was selected by the committee to lead as mayor, McCracken abdicated the position to take the federally funded post. McCracken said he could not head OOIE while also holding an elected position.

"I very much enjoyed the time that I spent on the Fredon Township Committee as an active voice for the residents there," he said.

"(Leaving the committee) was bittersweet," McCracken said. "It was very exciting to take on a new challenge and join this administration and come down to Trenton, but on the other hand, you miss being on the Township Committee as well."

The lifelong Sussex County resident attended Denison University in Ohio, where he swam competitively for the school and graduated with a degree in religion and a minor in political science. He spent the next several years as a firefighter and paramedic in Virginia. Later, he obtained a master's degree in health care administration from the University of New Hampshire.

"It was there that I began my career in long-term care," McCracken said. After his postgraduate studies, McCracken found employment at the United Methodist Homes of New Jersey in a variety of capacities including administrator and executive director. After 12 years there, McCracken became the chief executive officer for continued care retirement community Bristol Glen. After Gov. Chris Christie was elected in 2009, McCracken was asked to join the state agency.

"Although the work is emotionally difficult, I enjoy it very much and I feel that we make a difference in many lives," McCracken said.